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April 3, 2006

Secretary Mike Johanns
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns,

I am writing to urge you to provide additional funding to United States Forest Service (USFS) hazardous fuels and forest health projects in the State of Colorado. I am deeply concerned with the reductions in the Administration's 2006 and 2007 budget requests for important fire prevention and mitigation accounts, and that the President's FY2006 supplemental request did not seek additional funding for this important priority. But it is not too late for the Administration to send the right signal regarding the urgency of this issue. Specifically, I urge you to request additional funding for the USFS as the Senate prepares to consider the 2006 supplemental appropriations package.

The current outlook for the 2006 fire season in Colorado is extremely alarming. Below-average snowfalls, persistent drought conditions, and a devastating bark beetle infestation have created a dangerous situation in communities across the state. Some estimate that this fire season could be more dangerous and explosive than 2002, Colorado's worst fire season in recent memory.

Though the need for hazard fuels reduction and forest health treatment could not be more urgent, the current funding levels are inadequate to meet this need. At the FY06 budget levels, Colorado will receive only 35,000 acres of fuels treatment, far short of the 70,000-acre need and capacity. An additional 12,000 acres are ready for timber sales and forest health treatments, but these projects, cleared through the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, have been shelved for lack of funding.

The need for fuels reduction and forest health treatment continues to grow. The bark beetle infestation in northern Colorado is advancing each month, building ever-greater fuel loads among houses and structures. Smaller outbreaks on Colorado's Front Range, an expansive wildland-urban interface, will create even more hazardous conditions if left untreated.

In Colorado, there is a recent history of large fires and the costs associated with them must not be forgotten. Aside from the financial burden of fighting fires, and the losses to property and natural resources, there is a human toll. In 1994 the Storm King Tragedy claimed the lives of 14 men and women. In 2002, when the Hayman Fire burned 138,000 acres, 4 young men and women died in a van rollover on I-70 on the way to work that fire, and in 2002, during the Big Elk fire near Estes Park, Colorado, we lost a slurry bomber and its crew when it broke apart. Twelve days later a helicopter working the same fire crashed, killing its pilot.

We must do all we can to avoid these losses of life and property in this upcoming fire season. I therefore ask that you take all necessary steps to increase funding for fuels reduction, forest health treatment, and preparedness in this current fiscal year.

I look forward to working with you to ensure the safety of our communities and restore the health of our forests.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Ken Salazar". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ken" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Salazar".

Ken Salazar
United States Senator

CC: Undersecretary Mark Rey, USDA
Chief Dale Bosworth, United States Forest Service